

**Case Study:
Building the Wicked
Crisps Brand Using
Behavior Design**

THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE BEHIND WICKED CRISPS

CRAIN

THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE BEHIND WICKED CRISPS

How a snack maker with less than one percent of Frito-Lay's budget used behavior design to break through

Category:

Packaging, brand identity

Vertical market:

CPG (food)

Agencies:

TriggerPoint Design,
Four Man Furnace

Initiative:

Building the Wicked Crisps brand

Timing:

January-July 2018

Today's global multinational companies from packaged goods to pharmaceuticals to finance are leveraging internal behavioral economics teams to improve various aspects of performance, including marketing. Still, it is rare (if not impossible) to find an example of a marketer using behavioral science to build a brand from the ground up. Enter Wicked Crisps, a new vegetable snack gaining traction with millennials and other consumer groups pinning for a healthy and tasty snack. The key drivers: speed and efficiency. Thanks to a deft application of behavior design, Wicked Crisps went from product formulation to package design in just over six months.

The marketing challenge

Vegetable chips are not exactly a study in how to let consumers have their cake and eat it too. Most of the products are either a potato chip in disguise or else a tasteless "straw" with odd coloring and a texture that more closely resembles Styrofoam than anything found in nature. So when Phil Kosak, founder and president of Carolina Fine Snacks, first began experimenting with the cooking technique that led to the formulation of Wicked Crisps, he figured he was onto something big.

"The difference between baking and frying is in the heat transfer," says Kosak, who holds a Ph.D. in food science and has spent nearly four decades at his Greensboro, N.C.-based co-packing company developing products for food manufacturers. "I wanted to design an oven that would basically do what a fryer would do."



Kosak knew from first-hand experience how to disrupt the mainstream snack food industry. He had seen its inner workings—and failures—during a brief stint in R&D at Frito-Lay during the early 1980s. “The big guys skip steps and rarely learn from past mistakes,” Kosak says. Those same innovation issues continued to plague the industry some 30 years later, which is when Kosak decided to take the veggie-chip category head on. At the time, veggie chips were roughly a \$1 billion segment in which the large manufacturers were “losing market share like crazy” because consumers were increasingly rejecting efforts to masquerade fried potato products as healthy snacks.

Determined to break through, Kosak had been manipulating ovens in hopes of developing a powerful convection system that could turn his vision of a tasty veggie chip into a reality. He started by gutting an old oven used for popping corn and persuaded a manufacturer to build a working prototype. He then began testing new dough recipes using different combinations of grains and reconstituted spray-dried vegetables, a technique that removes moisture content while retaining the food’s innate properties. “A little goes a long way,” notes Kosak. “You can use 4 percent spray-dried tomato and you’re basically putting a tomato back into the dough.”

It took about four years for Kosak to settle on the final formulation, which he describes as having “all the properties that people are looking for in a snack, including a robust flavor and crunchy texture.” What it didn’t have was just about everything else that goes into building a new brand, not to mention a way to get the products out the door and onto store shelves.

From product development to new brand

In January 2016, Kosak made a cold call to Will Leach on the basis of a Google search of the term “behavior design.” Leach, the founder of TriggerPoint Design, was known for his work in the field and would later write a book on the subject, “Marketing to Mindstates.” Kosak didn’t sugarcoat his pitch. “We have no money for advertising and less than one percent of Frito-Lay’s budget,” he confessed, while insisting that his new veggie chip could be a game changer—with Leach’s help.



Wicked Crisps
founder Phil Kosak

“I knew behavioral science was everything,” says Kosak. “You have nine seconds to get the product off the shelf. My dad was a commercial artist, and he would tell me things all the time that I had no interest in then but understood more later: ‘Women buy circles, and men buy squares. People read in Z’s. Everything counts.’”

After hearing Kosak’s passion and his commitment to behavioral science principles—and his promise to, as Kosak tells the story, let the expert “do his thing”—Leach was hooked. He jumped on a flight to Greensboro, and with the help of his creative partners at Four Man Furnace, began sketching out ideas for a new marketing initiative that less than 18 months later would become the Wicked Crisps brand.

Leach is both a proselytizer and a pragmatist when it comes to behavior design (his preferred term for the application of behavioral science in marketing). “Traditional marketing methods work great if you have the dollars,” he says. “But if you overlay behavior design, you can do a lot less and still get the most out of every point of interaction with the consumer. If I could, I would do both. But when speed and budget are driving campaign decisions, using behavior design makes a lot of sense.”

On Wicked Crisps, he notes, “We uploaded final bag art in July 2016. It’s incredible how quickly we were able to get this work done.”

Creating the brand identity

The Wicked Crisps brand identity is the result of a combination of behavioral science research and insights, marketing intuition and pure gut instinct. The idea to target the brand to millennial moms came out of anecdotal feedback from sources including Kosak’s daughter. The use of saturated colors for the packaging—which takes its cues from brands in the craft beer category—was intended to make the snack product stand out on a shelf in a sea of generic brand names.

The name Wicked Crisps, meanwhile, arose from a straightforward branding exercise that included a competitive set analysis and feedback from the client, according to Steve Durman, founder and creative director of Four Man Furnace, in Grapevine, Texas. “They saw themselves as sort of a microbrew of snack foods and wanted a little edge to the name,” says Durman. “We took a variety of paths but landed on Wicked Crisps as the best way to represent taste and nutrition in one brand with an edge.”

The strategy to market the product to a psychological mindstate that Leach calls “optimistic autonomy” is where the science initially came into play. It was one of the recommendations of TriggerPoint’s Behavioral Activation Brief based on a formal RaMP (Rapid Mindstate Profiler) study, a quantitative research tool used to quickly uncover the customer’s motivations, approach, emotions and possible mental models when making decisions in a given category. “The

definition of autonomy is unique, independent, self determination of action,” explains Leach. “If a consumer in the snack category is driven by autonomy, they desire both good taste and nutrition. They don’t want to have to choose or sacrifice one for the other.”

Several aspects of the Wicked Crisps branding were firmly rooted in behavioral design cues from the brief. For example, the main visual of the two-headed Janus figure, which represents the duality of the snacking consumer’s wants and needs, was inspired by the need to “prime” autonomy motivations through various cues:

- Blending of good and evil
- Two sides of the same person form a unique whole
- Distinct traits with shared features
- Health on left and taste on right, but with a shared base

“The figure is a way to show two components of the same idea, but that [also demonstrate] they’re still the same person,” says Leach. “The twirling of hair, shared neckline and even the faces look like they could be sisters. But the left facial image has more curves and rounded features, whereas the one on the right is sharper.” This is intentional, he says, based on principles from a behavioral science discipline known as regulatory focus theory.

“When we try to achieve our goals subconsciously, there are two paths of least resistance: Promotion regulatory focus seeks to maximize

The Janus-like figure on Wicked Crisps packaging represents the duality of the snacking consumer’s wants and needs.



gain, while prevention regulatory focus mitigates risk,” explains Leach. “One common promotion regulatory prime shows energy moving left to right, or center out. This explains the gentle curve of the Wicked Crisps logo up and to the right. It also influenced a lot of the aesthetic details of the campaign. The more of these things you can do, the more intuitive and salient the branding will feel to the audience.”

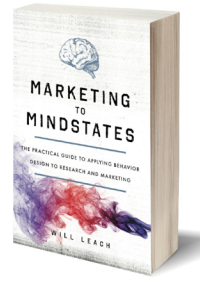
Where science meets intuition

So, to what extent did behavioral science lead (or follow) the creative process on Wicked Crisps? Durman looks at it this way: “As marketing professionals, we understand the need to speak to people in a way that generates an emotional response. It’s something we all do intuitively as good creatives. Behavioral science is a game changer because it takes out all the guesswork. It allows us to articulate to the client why we made certain choices based on scientific research. It helps to fend off comments like, ‘Well I just don’t think this color or that tagline works.’ The subjectivity is entirely removed.”

A perfect example is the packaging copy, which leverages subtle behavioral cues within a story about a particular flavor (e.g., Red Curry Hummus, Spinach Parmesan, Cheesy Cheese Pizza). “As we were writing these stories, we knew we needed to get some of those primes in there,” explains Durman. “That was the direction given to the copywriter. It wasn’t a case where we said, ‘Go write some good copy and we’ll reverse engineer and tell the client where the behavioral design lives.’”

With intuition and experience, he adds, a good copywriter probably would have gotten 75 percent of the way there, including the behavioral cues. “By loading these ideas up front,” he says, “it allowed the copywriter to not have to guess, spend less time and get closer to the final version on the first round.”

Leach adds that many of today’s marketing practitioners are using behavioral science intuitively, but now have a vocabulary and a framework to do so more consistently. “We often find through our behavioral audits that it’s not that they’re not doing priming—it’s that they’re priming three different motivations,” he says. “We go to them and say, ‘Let’s take



SPOTLIGHT: MARKETING TO MINDSTATES

By using advanced behavioral science to market to a consumer’s mindset—versus attitudes, beliefs or even emotions—brands can trigger a heightened state of emotional arousal with people. To market to a mindset, according to TriggerPoint Design founder Will Leach’s new book, brands must do two things: (a) identify which of the 18 unique mindstates that their customers are using in the moment of decision; and (b) take everything they know about using priming, framing effects and psychological triggers to activate on that specific mindset.

Identifying and activating as a result of a mindset requires four actions to be addressed, which all relate back to four social sciences and the Mindstate Behavioral Model (goals, motivations, regulatory approach and cognitive heuristics). By integrating the strategies below, marketers can guide their creative to fit with their customer’s subconscious mind.

Activate the goal: Remind people of their goals (goal theory to create desire) in the activation. Think of this as giving people a target/goal “to go after” when reading your ad.

Prime the need: Remind people why they want to reach their goals (motivational psychology to prime human motivations). Think of this as giving them the emotional engine to go after their goal.

Frame the choice: Show them the easiest way to get to their goal (approach/regulatory fit to frame your benefits). Think of this as giving them a map to follow when going after their goal.

Trigger the behavior: Help them make a quick, easy decision now (behavioral economics/cognitive heuristics to trigger a final decision). Think of this as giving them a shortcut to make an action fast and easy.

out the stuff that's not needed and focus on the stuff you do best.' The idea is to let behavior design flow into everything you do and the specific tactics will take care of themselves."

Retail deals and sales projections

Building a new packaged goods snack brand is one thing. Getting in the door at major retail stores is another. While the early inroads were spotty, Kosak says Wicked Crisps' distinctive and edgy look regularly turned heads at trade shows, especially with marketing consultants who worked for Fortune 500 food companies. "The snack food industry is very conservative," says Kosak. "They think that when they draw a tomato on the front of the bag, they've really gone off the deep end."

Kosak got his first big distribution break in early 2017 when he ran into an old acquaintance, a buyer at Food Lion, at a local trade show in North Carolina. "Food Lion is not a typical demo for us—it's a meat-and-potatoes chain—but they picked it up on a 50-store trial," recalls Kosak. "They genuinely didn't think it was going to last 90 days. Well, 50 stores became 200, then 1,000, and it's been growing

same-store sales at 20 percent per month. Now we're selling it by the truckloads."

A more recent win came through a deal to display Wicked Crisps in the deli section at Harris Teeter supermarket outlets, and Kosak says other major chains including Publix are expressing interest. As for future sales, he's as optimistic as ever.

"I believe Wicked Crisps can be a \$200 million brand in the next two years," says Kosak. "We're talking about a \$10 billion snack industry. Wellness is supposedly growing 25 percent per year, but it's flatlining in the snack category because there's so little innovation. Manufacturers are adding ingredients people are interested in, like quinoa, but the stuff they're making tastes terrible."

As often happens with CPG, true innovation comes from smaller, upstart brands. Big firms are sure to note Kosak's success and try to copy his product formulation. They may even use behavioral science in their marketing strategies. More likely, says Kosak, they'll move to scoop up the Wicked Crisps brand for themselves. "I wouldn't be surprised if a big company tried to buy us out to remove the competition." **AA**

WHAT MARKETERS ARE SAYING ABOUT BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

"We believe in and utilize behavioral science as a foundation in our research. This approach has led us to have a deeper understanding of who our target customers are and what their motivations and drivers are, which in turn has enabled us to refine and be more prescriptive with our sales and marketing efforts."

—**Barrie Stone, Product Manager, AdvanTech, Huber Engineered Woods**

"A successful product is able to help resolve an unmet need of the consumer. Telling that story to potential customers can be challenging, even with a product that delivers meaningful value. By utilizing behavioral science, we can find ways to share this story in a meaningful way that makes it easier on the customer. This is why behavioral science is changing the way we think about creative strategy."

—**Aditya Varanasi, Founder and CEO, Sophos Marketing**

"We see significant potential in first determining our consumer's motivation for the emotional purpose behind their goals, and then clarifying our approach to execution—either promotion or prevention based. In the case of DairyPure milk, the nation's largest branded milk, we believe our consumers' motivation is "Nurturance" and "Security" due to the role that milk plays in the lives of children by building strong bodies and tasting great. And we believe the best approach to execution is "Promotion" because it will help us prime the already inherently good qualities in milk. Now the trick is for us to execute this consistently across all of our marketing plans."

—**Marissa Jarratt, SVP, Marketing, and GM, Frozen Business Unit, Dean Foods**

"By refining our customer insights approach, we are beginning to identify the cognitive biases and/or heuristics our target customers may be using when considering our brands. We used to ask customers if they were willing to prescribe our brand without systematically attempting to decipher their goals and motivations. Before changing any marketing strategy or tactic, we are looking through the behavioral economics lens to further understand why our customers and non-customers do what they do—even with the same level of knowledge and prescribing restrictions."

—**Rick Ortega, Director of Global Marketing, Merck**

Ad Age Members Get More

This case study was created exclusively for Ad Age subscribers. Ad Age has a host of tools—from events to webcasts to quarterly trend reports—that give you the insights and ideas to move your business forward.

Individual and group subscriptions are available. Learn more at [**AdAge.com/membership**](http://AdAge.com/membership).

Ad Age Studio 30

Ad Age Studio 30 helps your brand connect with an influential audience actively seeking new partners, solutions and products. Through original custom articles, thought-leadership content, events, research, webcasts, white papers, infographics and more, our end-to-end solutions help your content reach and resonate. [**Studio30@adage.com**](mailto:Studio30@adage.com)

Staff:

Writer: Michael Applebaum
Senior Art Director: Jennifer Chiu
Copy Editor: Kate Papacosma

Contact us:

James Palma
General Manager, Revenue
and Client Partnerships
[**jpalma@adage.com**](mailto:jpalma@adage.com)

John Dioso

Editor, Studio 30
[**jdioso@adage.com**](mailto:jdioso@adage.com)

Important to Important People