

# Selling Orville Redenbacher

## The Creation of a 1970s Advertising Icon

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My earliest memory of my Grandpa Orville and Grandma Corinne Redenbacher dates from the late 1950s or early 1960s at their house in Valparaiso, Indiana. At that time, Grandpa had entered the final stage of his long effort to develop a better popcorn hybrid: the first gourmet popping corn. In 1951, with his business partner Charles Bowman, he had bought George F. Chester & Son, Inc., which he soon renamed Chester Hybrids. As company president, Grandpa hired plant geneticist Carl Hartman in 1959; the team finalized its popcorn formula—which they christened “RedBow”—in 1965.<sup>1</sup>

That summer, my family and I once again visited Grandpa and Grandma, along with many of their Valparaiso neighbors, at a community event to celebrate the discovery of the new popcorn hybrid. While the event promised great things for RedBow, it was not until 1970, after

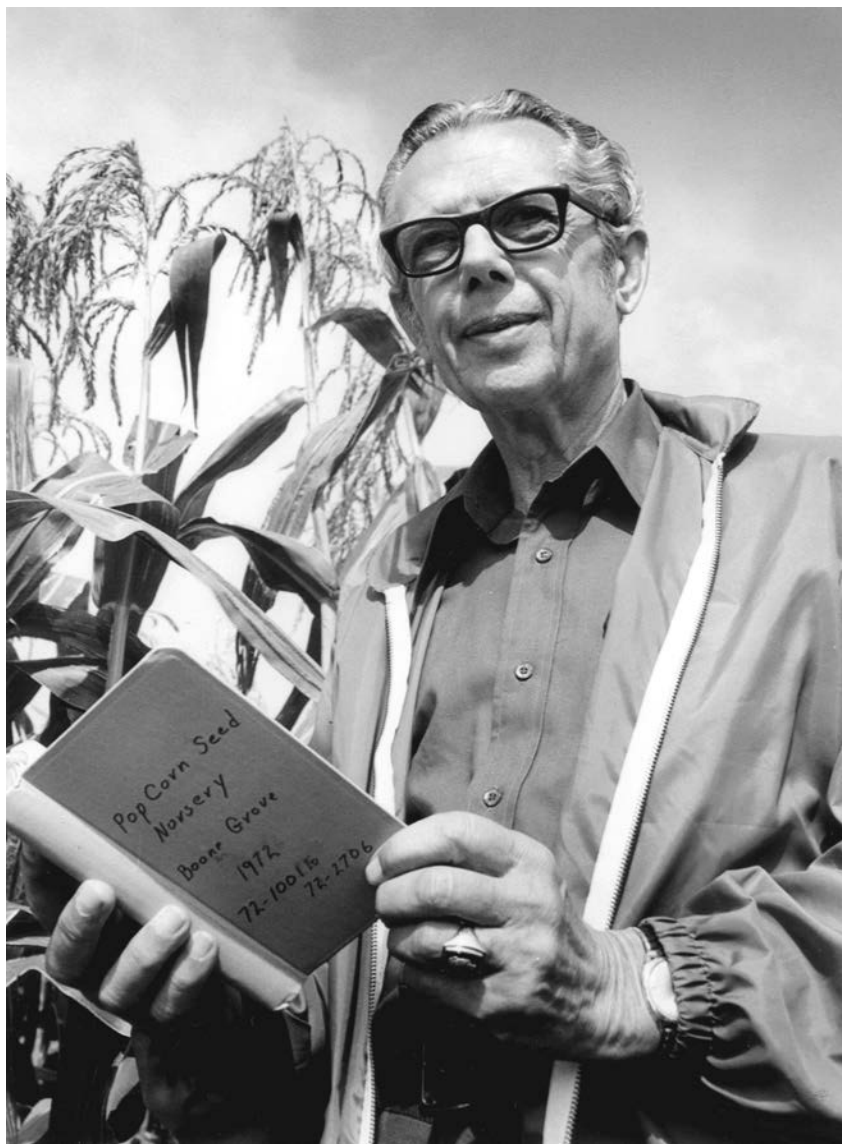
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<sup>1</sup>Orville Redenbacher, *Orville Redenbacher's Popcorn Book* (New York, 1984), 8, 15-16; Robert W. Topping, *Just Call Me Orville: The Story Of Orville Redenbacher* (West Lafayette, Ind., 2011), 49-50, 52-54; “From Corn Trains To Space Shuttles; Indiana Crop Improvement's First 100 Years: 1900-2000,” unpaginated program brochure for the Indiana Crop Improvement Association's 100th annual conference, February 2000, Indiana Crop Improvement Association Collections, Lafayette, Indiana; author telephone interview with Diane Barkley, Co-Alliance LLP (Avon, Indiana), August 17, 2011, author's notes in Orville Redenbacher Papers, MSA 37, Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries, West Lafayette, Indiana.

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INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY, 110 (December 2014). © 2014, Trustees of Indiana University.



Orville Redenbacher in Boone Grove, Indiana, 1972. Redenbacher experimented throughout the 1960s to produce a high-quality popping corn; in 1970, "Orville Redenbacher's Gourmet Popping Corn" was the result.

Courtesy of the author

several years of poor sales, that Grandpa and Bowman sought the advice from a Chicago advertising firm—Gerson, Howe & Johnson—that would change the fate of their business venture. The agency advised the partners to rename their product “Orville Redenbacher’s Gourmet Popping Corn,” and to place Grandpa’s face on the plastic popcorn jars.<sup>2</sup> Late the following year, Grandpa’s company, now known simply as Chester, Inc., concluded an agreement with Blue Plate Foods, a small New Orleans, Louisiana-based, wholly owned food-processing subsidiary of Hunt-Wesson Foods that sold and distributed food in the southern and southeastern United States. According to the terms of the deal, Chester would raise, process, and package the popcorn, while Blue Plate would market and sell the product through Hunt-Wesson’s marketing department and national sales force. Using its existing contracts with Indiana and Illinois farmers, Chester agreed to raise between seven thousand and ten thousand acres of gourmet popping corn, acreages that would rise annually. Grandpa’s 1971 introduction of the newly packaged snack at Chicago’s Marshall Field’s department store marked the advent of a national marketing campaign and a new phase in the life of Orville Redenbacher’s popcorn.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The RedBow name was never trademarked. In 1970, Chester, Inc., applied for the first trademark of the “Orville Redenbacher’s Gourmet Popping Corn” name, and the trademark was issued in 1971. A history of the trademarks associated with the brand can be found at <http://www.uspto.gov/trademarks/>.

<sup>3</sup>Suzanne Muchnic, *Odd Man In: Norton Simon And The Pursuit Of Culture* (Berkeley, Cal., 1998), 130-31, 136; Norton Simon, Inc., *Annual Report* 1972, 1-2; Norton Simon, Inc., *Annual Report* 1976, 2; Frazier Moore, “A Corn For Connoisseurs,” *Madison Avenue*, May 1985, 16-17; Topping, *Just Call Me Orville*, 81-83, 86; Irving B. Gerson, *Be Big Somewhere & Other Essays On Marketing* (Chicago, 1977), 181; Gerson, *Tomorrow’s Advertising “Agency”* (Chicago, 1970), inside back cover; Jennifer Mossman, ed., *Almanac Of Famous People: A Comprehensive Reference Guide*, vol. 1: *Biographies A-R*, 7th ed. (Farmington Hills, Mich., 2001), 1,593; Chris Andersen, “Meet The Presidents; Orville Redenbacher,” *Good Housekeeping*, May 1987, 166; “The King Of Pop,” *People Weekly*, October 2, 1995, p. 139; “Orville Redenbacher Pops Off On Product’s Success Secret,” *Marketing News*, June 12, 1981, p. 17; Marshall Field & Company newsletter, “The Field Glass,” volume 38, number 12, April 12, 1971, Federated Department Stores’ Records of Marshall Field & Company, ca. 1875-2003, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, Illinois; Thomas Riggs, ed., *Encyclopedia Of Major Marketing Campaigns* (Detroit, Mich., 2000), 385; “He Saw A Need And He Filled It,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 24, 1971, p. B1; “Royalty In The Walnut Room,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 2, 1971, p. B9.

Hunt-Wesson Foods divested itself of Blue Plate Foods in 1974 but retained its agreement with Chester, Inc. In 1976, Hunt-Wesson bought out Chester’s popcorn business for a reported \$4 million and an agreement to use Orville Redenbacher’s Gourmet Popping Corn brand name in perpetuity. In a separate contract with Hunt-Wesson, Grandpa agreed to work for the rest of his life as the persona and chief promoter of “his” gourmet popping corn. See Topping, *Just Call Me Orville*, 89-91; Giovanna Breu, “To The Top,” *People Weekly*, November 13, 1978, p. 80; Robert Runde, “A Popcorn King Who’s In The Chips,” *Money*, November 1979, 106; Press release, Edelman Public Relations Agency files, Chicago, Illinois.



The author with his grandfather and grandmother Corinne at the Edward Hotel, Durban, South Africa, 1968. Redenbacher and his wife toured several African countries as part of an agricultural outreach with People-to-People International.

Courtesy of the author

Redenbacher's success depended on more than simply the quality of his corn or its distinctive packaging. In the years that followed the Marshall Field rollout, Grandpa combined his unique product and his charismatic personality in a series of folksy television advertisements that made him a cultural icon. His breakthrough in this process came after the brand was assigned to the San Francisco offices of Ketchum Advertising, USA, whose managers, Donald Sullivan and Robert Kroyer, persuaded Hunt-Wesson to go beyond its small-space print advertising and try a limited television advertising effort on behalf of the popcorn. When subsequent sales soared beyond even the agency's most optimistic projections, Hunt-Wesson was able to spend the additional money necessary to expand production and to roll out a national television campaign. This \$6-million advertising and promotional effort made Orville Redenbacher's the first nationally marketed and distributed popcorn brand.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Craig Mathiesen to the author, email, June 2010, author's redaction of original email in Orville Redenbacher Papers; *Good Housekeeping*, May 1987, 164; *Madison Avenue*, May 1985, 17.

It was Ketchum writer Craig Mathiesen who, until he moved off the brand in 1984, was responsible for creating most of the Redenbacher commercials. For his own part, Mathiesen credited much of the agency's success in that era to his creative team, to account manager Kroyer (who eventually became president of Ketchum Advertising, USA), and to Hunt-Wesson Foods clients, such as Grandpa, who appreciated Mathiesen's recommendations and clever, humorous messaging.<sup>5</sup>

Mathiesen noted that the central importance of Redenbacher's personality to the commercials required a certain amount of preparation on Grandpa's part. With photographer-turned-commercial-director Harry Hamburg, who had a flare for subtle comedy, Mathiesen worked on Redenbacher's acting skills, observing that he showed a gift for the craft. Still, it was Redenbacher's ability to be himself, to laugh at mistakes, smile, and exude genuine warmth that endeared him to the buying public. Redenbacher, Mathiesen recalls, had an innately friendly, charismatic personality, as well as an innocent, straightforward, down-home believability. The agency molded these qualities into one of the most familiar, engaging spokespersons to appear on television; as Mathiesen put it, "I couldn't go to Central Casting and find any actor who could be a better Orville Redenbacher than Orville Redenbacher."<sup>6</sup>

Like all television spokespersons, Grandpa was required to join the Screen Actors Guild; like others, as well, he stood to earn not only direct fees but also potentially lucrative residuals based on subsequent airings of his commercials.<sup>7</sup> While companies typically reserved ten to fifteen percent of their advertising budgets for the purpose of paying celebrity spokesmen, no hard and fast rule dictated the amount of such contracts. In some marketing contracts, the agency itself took on the responsibility of negotiating, on its client's behalf, with the celebrity. At other times, the agency might secure the services of a specialized negotiator to act on its behalf in negotiating a deal. Finally, the client company might choose to handle the negotiation itself, as Hunt-Wesson Foods did with Redenbacher. One night, as Grandpa's contract was about to expire, he

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<sup>5</sup>Craig Mathiesen to the author, June 2010, Orville Redenbacher Papers; Orville Redenbacher Popcorn television advertisements, multiple dates, DVD, Orville Redenbacher Papers.

<sup>6</sup>Jean-Marie Dru, *Disruption: Overturning Conventions And Shaking Up The Marketplace* (New York, 1996), 3; Craig Mathiesen to the author, June 2010, Orville Redenbacher Papers; Topping, *Just Call Me Orville*, 90.

<sup>7</sup>Craig Mathiesen to the author, June 2010, Orville Redenbacher Papers.

called Mathiesen at home, declaring that he believed he was underpaid, but admitting that he did not know a fair amount for which he should ask. Mathiesen, who was working for Hunt-Wesson, told Grandpa that he could not advise him without risking a conflict of interest and suggested that Grandpa talk to an agent. Mathiesen recalled, many years later, that “somehow, it all worked out” and that everyone was happy when the matter was settled.<sup>8</sup>

While two of Mathiesen and Hamburg’s earliest Redenbacher commercials, “Firehouse” and “General Store,” both from 1976, put Grandpa alongside real citizens from Valparaiso, Mathiesen felt that the practice of using real people in the ads would prove unsustainable over time. Instead, he advised two strategies to perpetuate the allure of the Redenbacher brand. First, he recommended emphasizing the brand name itself. The mere use of the “Gourmet” descriptor was, he believed, insufficient to convince people to pay a premium for the product, and “Redenbacher” was a difficult name to remember. Although it took some persuading, Mathiesen was able to convince Hunt-Wesson to allow the mispronunciation of Grandpa’s name for comic effect. Secondly, he elected to skew Grandpa’s persona from simply an on-camera spokesperson to that of a successful, proud “inventor” who finds himself victimized by the other character or characters in the commercials. Despite winning and proving his product’s superiority, something would always happen. Inevitably, too, his name would be mispronounced, changed, or forgotten. In a manner akin to such successful television situation comedies of the day as *The Bob Newhart Show* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the strength of the commercials’ humor lay in the interaction of a likable, relatively serious star with his surrounding characters.<sup>9</sup>

The first of the Redenbacher advertisements to realize this humorous formula, “Tommy,” aired in 1977. In the ad, a young Redenbacher assistant named Tommy mispronounces Grandpa’s name as “Bedenracher.” Redenbacher mildly rebukes the young man, saying, “Redenbacher, Tom, Redenbacher.”<sup>10</sup> A 1979 advertisement, “Ambassador,” took off from the axiom that the Soviets would never claim that any product of the free

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.; Hamish Pringle, *Celebrity Sells* (West Sussex, U. K., 2004), 173-75.

<sup>9</sup>Craig Mathiesen to the author, June 2010, Orville Redenbacher Papers; Orville Redenbacher Popcorn television advertisements, multiple dates, DVD, Orville Redenbacher Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

world was as good as their own. According to Mathiesen, the perfect “Russian” actor was found for the commercial, and the team produced one of its best-scripted spots to date. As Mathiesen explained the plot, the skeptical Soviet ambassador, finding that Redenbacher popcorn was better than the Russian variety, immediately adopted Orville as “Redenboskov.” The spot, which was taped on August 23, 1979, never aired; after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of that year, Hunt-Wesson elected not to show it.<sup>11</sup>

At times, the commercials’ humor extended beyond anything of which viewers were aware. “At The Prom ’82” (which actually aired in 1981) included a scene of Grandpa surrounded by teenagers, a teacher, and a coach. The spot’s ostensible purpose was to remind people that “You could pop lots of popcorn for the same price as two bags of chips”—making popcorn an affordable snack during an economic slowdown. Once the film was in the can, Mathiesen asked Redenbacher to do another version of the commercial, this time saying, “You can pop all this for the same price as 2 ’ludes and a pound of flake”—a reference to quaaludes and cocaine. A couple of the children burst out laughing, and the child-welfare people on the set were aghast. This joke commercial was shown privately to Hunt-Wesson marketing director James Frawley, who met the prank with a firm command: “BURN THAT!”<sup>12</sup>

Mathiesen kept other unproduced commercials on hand for more serious purposes. In the event that Grandpa became incapacitated or died, Ketchum Advertising felt it necessary to keep back-up commercials ready. While Mathiesen and his team considered several ideas in anticipation of such an event, the only one that promised to perpetuate the Redenbacher brand was their plan to have Orville’s grandson Gary begin appearing with him in the commercials. The agency reasoned that Gary could succeed his grandfather, if necessary, in preserving the company image.<sup>13</sup>

Ketchum’s selection of Gary to join Redenbacher in his later popcorn commercials came at the recommendation of Redenbacher himself. The agency interviewed the young man (who changed his name from Gary D. Fish to Gary F. Redenbacher for the purpose of the job), then gave him a full-blown screen test. After the test clips received positive reactions

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.





Fans in Indianapolis signing one section of a giant card for Redenbacher's 80th birthday.

In 1987, an extensive public relations campaign involved an Amtrak train that stopped at fourteen cities across the country, carrying an 1800-square-foot "birthday card" eventually signed by about 100,000 people.

Courtesy of the author

at focus group screenings, the agency broadcast three test commercials in Albuquerque, New Mexico. One tested higher than any commercial Hunt-Wesson had ever made. The other two placed in the top ten. Subsequently, Gary and his grandfather filmed about eighty commercials together, most—but not all—of which aired nationwide.<sup>14</sup>

Along with their ability to exploit the positive effect of Grandpa's—and eventually Gary's—personality upon potential customers, the Ket-

<sup>14</sup>Gary D. Fish (Gary F. Redenbacher), email to the author, July 20, 2011, Orville Redenbacher Papers. In his later years, Grandpa and the Ketchum team sometimes chose to forego scripts altogether, improvising the commercials in informal question-and-answer sessions. See Orville Redenbacher to John Schnurlein (President, Valparaiso, Indiana, Chamber of Commerce), October 8, 1988, CRA 339, Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce Records, Calumet Regional Archives, Indiana University Northwest.



chum agency's Redenbacher advertisements took advantage of a second key marketing technique: the side-by-side comparison, supported by a "secret formula" claim, that would show Redenbacher's to be a superior product capable of commanding a premium price. This technique depended, of course, on proving the brand's ability to deliver outstanding taste and to produce more popped kernels per batch than other brands. At the outset of the campaign, this was a relatively easy task; no copycat brands cut into Redenbacher's market share, as no other manufacturer believed that a premium-priced popcorn could sell. Only a few years after Redenbacher began to succeed, however, others did begin to copy his technique.<sup>15</sup>

Mathiesen's commercials most often illustrated the side-by-side comparison through the device of an overflowing pan or carton of popcorn. This key visual sequence or mnemonic, combined with the name and image of the person who had helped to create the popcorn, created a powerful pitch. Just as Frank Perdue's mournful television persona resonated with the proposition that "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken," the Ketchum advertisements established the reliability of their product by presenting Grandpa as an ordinary family man who enjoyed his food as much as his customers did.<sup>16</sup>

In one early form of market testing, Ketchum practiced an assessment known as Day After Recall, or the Burke test. One day after inserting a commercial into one or two cities' television programming, Mathiesen's colleagues called residents in those media markets to determine if they had watched the previous night's relevant shows. Viewers who answered "yes" were asked what, if any, commercials they remembered. The number of those who remembered the Redenbacher ad provided the agency with an Unaided Recall number—the most desirable finding. An additional portion of interviewees—the Aided Recall number—remembered the commercial after a prompt from the caller. Respondents were then asked to describe the elements of the commercial they had watched. The more detailed their responses, the richer the communicative power of the commercial. Spots that failed to reach an established norm in this category were generally discarded as failures, but, according to Mathiesen, none of Redenbacher's spots failed. Instead, many received recall scores of higher

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<sup>15</sup>Craig Mathiesen to the author, June 2010, Orville Redenbacher Papers; Hamish Pringle, email to the author, June 30, 2010, Orville Redenbacher Papers.

<sup>16</sup>Hamish Pringle, e-mail to the author, June 30, 2010, Orville Redenbacher Papers.

than 70 percent; a few scored into the 90th percentile range—among the highest-recalled advertisements ever tested.<sup>17</sup>

Without any ambition to become famous, Grandpa did so. At base, his celebrity happened as a natural consequence of his pursuit of one dream: to create a better popcorn. But without the skills of the advertisers, public relations people, and media experts who created the character that he successfully inhabited in his memorable television commercials—a character whose humility, humor, and honesty required no stretch of his acting talents—Orville Redenbacher would have remained, for most Americans, little more than an obscure Hoosier agricultural entrepreneur.



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<sup>17</sup>Craig Mathiesen to the author, June 2010, Orville Redenbacher Papers; Orville Redenbacher Popcorn television advertisements, multiple dates, DVD, Orville Redenbacher Papers.